PITTA

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DECCAN BIRDERS EVENTS

In light of the Corona virus (COVID-19) epidemic, all Deccan Birders Field Trips and Indoor Meetings are on hold until further notice. Details of upcoming activities will be communicated once the situation improves.

BIRDING DURING PANDEMIC TIMES

Report: Bodhan, Dt Nizamabad, June-July 2020

Text & Photos: Mohd Adnan Uddin

A view of Bodhan

It was disturbing living alone in a flat in Hyderabad and working from home, while the world, at large, was grappling with a pandemic. I was longing to be amidst nature and was waiting for the moment when I could finally go out and spend time in the wilderness. For a number of reasons, I had not been birding regularly as I used to. The lockdown had made me even more restless and I was yearning to break free. As soon as travel was permitted, I rode all the way to my hometown on May 23, 2020, and the very next morning I left for the nearby Bellal Lake for birdwatching. That was the moment I realized what I had been missing for so long!

My hometown Bodhan (District Nizamabad) is located in the north-western region in Telangana. Although the town has historical significance, it achieved recognition for having one of the biggest sugar factories in Asia – Nizam Deccan Sugars Limited (NDSL). Unfortunately, the factory is closed now but it left us with some fond memories. Agriculture and allied activities form the backbone of the town's economy. Bodhan has predominantly black soil, formed from rocks of cretaceous lava. As the region falls under the Deccan plateau, large piles of rocks are strewn all over the town, some of them really huge. The rocks are related to the Archaean and Deccan Trap formations. Several folktales are associated with the rocks found near Bellal Lake in the town.

When I reached my town, the summer season was coming to an end but there was no respite from the heat although it was late May. After the confinement in the city, though, it was refreshing to spend time in the open verdant surroundings amidst the chattering of birds, as they went about their business. I was able to spot several common birds near the lake.

Within a few days, monsoon set in and the transformation of landscape was fascinating. The Indian monsoon lays a green carpet on earth and it is enthralling to see how the everyday landscape completely transforms after the rains. It is as if the engines of nature get oiled during the monsoons.

Monsoon also heralds the start of breeding season for many species. There is increased availability of food, and nesting activity and courtship rituals become commonplace. I would regularly frequent places in my town, especially around Bellal Lake. Every visit of mine resulted in the discovery of different bird species and the numbers kept adding up every week. It wasn't just the birds but also the diversity of species like butterflies, insects and reptiles that fascinated me. It was then I realized that I needed to document them. After all, documenting species of one's own hometown is an honour.

Years of birdwatching have made me appreciate the importance of patience and silent observation. The rewards have been great. I managed to find diverse species and was able to document many of them.

Indian Peafowl male displaying

I spotted a good number of Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*). The State of India's Birds 2020 Report has highlighted the growth in numbers of Indian Peafowl. Thanks to their loud *may-awe* calls, it is easy to detect their presence in the vicinity. These National Birds of India are commonly found foraging near agricultural fields, and are quite active at dawn and dusk. It is such a treat to watch their courtship behavior – the peacock displaying his fan-shaped crest and brightly coloured plumage to the peahen. I was able to catch this on camera.

One day in mid-June, I was walking through a small stream near the lake when, suddenly, there was some movement in the reeds nearby and a bird rose from the reeds and flew towards a tree. I immediately pointed my camera towards it and got a few pictures.

Cinnamon Bittern

When I saw the pictures, I could not contain my excitement – it was my first sighting of the Cinnamon Bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*)! It is a shy bird which is very good at concealing itself. Though not overly secretive, it flies away on seeing humans. It is usually found near reedbeds and paddy fields, and is found throughout Asia, especially Southeast Asia. The bird feeds on fish, worms and frogs. I observed that the males fed mainly in the paddy fields, and, at dusk, took refuge in reedbeds or any trees nearby and rendered their characteristic croaking calls. Many a time I observed them perched on trees and calling continuously at dusk. There was once a small skirmish between two of the males. There were four males in all. If there is one bird that enthralled me the most in this trip, it is the Cinnamon Bittern.

Yellow Bittern

A few days later, I spotted another Bittern – the Yellow Bittern *(Ixobrychus sinensis)*. It inhabits vegetated wetlands and reedbeds and is really difficult to spot. Its habitat and behaviour are almost similar to that of the Cinnamon Bittern. Watching the bird move through the reeds by clinging to the leaves was a sight to behold! I found a breeding pair in the reedbeds near the lake.

Ruddy-breasted Crake

On the same day, at the same spot, I spotted two elusive water birds – Ruddy-breasted Crake (*Porzana fusca*) and Brown Crake (*Amaurornis akool*). The birds belong to the Rail and Crake family, Rallidae. Found near marshes, Ruddy-breasted Crakes are extremely shy and rarely venture out from the reeds. With their long toes and short tails, they look very cute as they run around chasing insects on the ground.

Indian Nightjar

One day, as I was walking near the rocks, I suddenly saw a bird rush out near my feet. I realized immediately which bird it could possibly be – I had had similar experiences in the past when I had, unfortunately, missed seeing it. It was the Indian Nightjar (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*). Fortunately for me, it did not fly far away and rested on a rock nearby. Completely mesmerized by its presence, I slowly sat down on a rock and took a few pictures. After all, it is not easy to spot them as they are great masters of camouflage, blending spectacularly into their environment.

Even at a short distance, it is quite difficult to spot them. A nocturnal bird, it snoozes during the day and gets active at dawn and dusk, scouting for insects. The Latin name of the bird translates to "goat sucker", referring to an ancient myth that the bird sucks on the milk of goats in the night. However, their diet mainly consists of insects. They are such masters of disguise that I could not find the pair again after the initial sighting. I hope to see them soon again.

Before the monsoon set in, I spotted the Pied Crested (or Jacobin) Cuckoo. Sighting this bird is considered welcome as it is said to herald the onset of monsoon in India. Although the bird is believed to reach India through Africa by riding the winds of the monsoon, there is another population which is believed to be resident to India.

Pied Crested (or Jacobin) Cuckoo

Birdwatchers in India have been trying to see the correlation between the first sighting of this Cuckoo and the onset of monsoons in India. Recently Dr Suresh Kumar from Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and his team have tagged a Pied Cuckoo with a satellite transmitter to study the migration of the species. The tagged bird has been named 'Megh', a short for '*Meghdoot'*, meaning 'cloud messenger'. It will be interesting to see if the study unravels the legend of the bird.

Jungle Cat

Once, I was also rewarded with the sighting of a solitary Jungle Cat. It is usually shy and it is difficult to get a glimpse of it. As soon as I spotted the cat, it hid in the bushes and I had to spend quite some time, standing far, to just have a look at it. Finally, after a long wait, I finally caught a glimpse of it. A beautiful feline, its coat was a mix of reddish and sandy brown. Jungle Cats are mostly found near swampy and marshy areas and near reedbeds and paddy fields. They are carnivorous and their diet includes rodents, birds and small mammals.

The town has two major crops – paddy and sugarcane. After the arrival of the monsoon, there was hectic sowing activity in the fields. I could see paddy cultivation everywhere I went. It provides the ideal habitat for various species, with its bountiful supply of food. The interaction between the species makes for interesting observations.

Indian Pond Heron

The Indian Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) is ubiquitous in paddy fields – no wonder it was also called the Paddybird. These birds are seen not only at the edges of the wetlands, but also in the fields, wading through water and feasting on worms and other insects.

Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus ibis*) are also commonly found in agricultural fields, especially when tractors are tilling the soil. The movement of the vehicle disturbs the soil, thereby flushing the invertebrates, which are gleefully eaten by the birds.

The Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus)* is another bird which is commonly seen perched on the wires across the agricultural fields. With its graceful, deep forked tail, the bird makes short bursts of flights to catch insects. I have always admired the fearless attitude of Drongos. They are quite protective of their territory – I once saw one chattering harshly and swooping down at a Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) and chasing it away! Drongos not only have a vast range of calls, they can also mimic other birds. I have noticed that Black Drongos roost quite late so, during my birding trips, I would usually spend some time even after sunset.

Black Drongo anting

I have also observed anting behaviour in Black Drongos. Once, there was a pair sitting on the ground in a field, and I saw them picking up ants and wiping them all over their feathers. It is believed that the formic acid of the ants helps destroy the avian parasites such as lice and mites.

I have seen several colonies of Baya Weavers (*Ploceus philippinus*) near the paddy fields. The palm fibre, grass, and paddy crop provide good nesting material for the Weavers. The constant chattering of the birds, and their displays on their nests, coupled with the inspection of the nests by female birds, makes for a very pleasant sight. Many a time I would sit nearby and simply observe the entire process.

Baya Weaver

Streaked Weaver

I was also fortunate to spot a colony of Streaked Weavers (*Ploceus manyar*) near the lake. The birds were nesting on reeds near the lake bed. Their nest looks quite different from the one that the Baya Weavers build. The nest of a Streaked Weaver is retort-shaped, woven on to the leaves of the reeds.

Black-breasted Weaver

In the same place, I also spotted a few Black-breasted Weavers (*Ploceus benghalensis*). They looked so different from the other weaver species, with the male having a prominent golden-yellow crown.

Black-headed (or Tricolored) Munia

There were scores of Black-headed (or Tricolored) Munias (*Lonchura malacca*) and Indian Silverbills (*Euodice malabarica*) near the wetland. Many a time I have seen both, collectively feeding on the abundant seeds in the undergrowth. There were also many Scaly-breasted Munias (*Lonchura punctulata*) and a few Red Avadavats (*Amandava amandava*) near the paddy fields.

Grey-bellied Cuckoo

Grey-bellied Cuckoo hepatic female

Cuckoos are pretty active in the monsoon season. Their repetitive whistle-like calls are so soothing to hear. I have always found the Grey-bellied Cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*) very intriguing. Back in Golconda in Hyderabad, I would listen to the calls of this bird all night long.

I also spotted a hepatic female Grey-bellied Cuckoo one day. With dark barring and reddish-brown colour, this morph of the cuckoo looks quite beautiful. There were a few Common Hawk Cuckoos (*Hierococcyx varius*) too. They are popularly known as the Brainfever Bird, as the call of the bird resembles the words "brain fever".

Common Hawk Cuckoo

Grey Francolin

Quails and Partridges are also quite active in monsoons. Grey Francolins (*Francolinus pondicerianus*) are widespread here, and I was lucky enough to spot the Painted Francolin (*Francolinus pictus*) too. Initially I was not familiar with its call. Members of Deccan Birders helped me identify the species. Compared to Grey Francolin, the Painted Francolins are even harder to spot. But they are very vocal during the monsoons as it is their breeding season. When one bird gave a call, I could, immediately, hear another call in response.

I have always wanted to photograph Quails, but given their shy nature, it is very difficult to click their pictures – especially the Buttonquails! With thick undergrowth due to monsoons, it becomes easier for the reclusive birds to scoot into the vegetation and hide themselves. After several such encounters with the birds, I realised, no matter how keen my eyes were, theirs were sharper and could spot me before I could spot them! Every time I was sure I would find Quails nearby, they would spot me first, and disappear into the bushes.

Barred Buttonquail

Finally, one sunny afternoon, I was lucky to find a pair of Barred Buttonquails (*Turnix suscitator*) foraging in the grass. I could finally get a picture of the bird. I failed to spot the Black Bittern (*Dupetor flavicollis*) in the reeds, though, and could do so only when it took flight.

White-breasted Kingfisher

Common Kingfisher

There is also a healthy population of Kingfishers in the town. While the White-breasted Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) is commonly seen near the agricultural fields, the Common Kingfisher (*Alcedo atthis*) is mostly found near small streams and ponds.

There are a few Pied Kingfishers (*Ceryle rudis*) too, usually perched on wooden poles and fishermen's boats in the lake.

Pied Kingfisher

Pheasant-tailed Jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus)*, Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus)*, Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus)* and Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) are some of the other species thriving near the lake.

Bronze-winged Jacana immature

Large Grey Babbler

Large Grey Babblers (*Turdoides malcolmi*) and Yellow-billed Babblers (*Turdoides affinis*) are commonly found foraging in groups and also indulging in allopreening. I could spot Yellow-eyed Babblers (*Chrysomma sinense*), mostly in pairs. There were a few Tawny-bellied Babblers (*Dumetia hyperythra*) foraging under the shrubs and feeding on jungle berries.

I could find all the three resident Ibis species of the state – Red-naped Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*), Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus)*, and Glossy Ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*).

Glossy Ibis are high in number. I always enjoyed their fascinating flying formation in the sky every day. These birds move in flocks and forage in rice fields. Their curved bill helps them probe into the mud to catch aquatic invertebrates. Sadly, these birds are seen as pests by some farmers. They believe that the feeding behaviour of this bird in paddy fields destroy the rice saplings and cause huge losses to them. To avert this, they spray grains laced with poison to kill the birds. As the birds collapse, feral dogs devour the birds. I have seen other species of birds dying after consuming the poisoned grains. I wish there could be a solution for this 'conflict'.

Indian Roller

I had to wait for two months before I finally spotted the Indian Roller (*Coracias benghalensis*). On a day when the sky was overcast, I finally saw a pair perched on the power lines.

I was surprised by the absence of Shrikes. There is not much woodland habitat in the town and I had not spotted any Woodpeckers either. I tried exploring some areas that are not easy to access. Right from day one, I had to navigate through difficult terrains to reach the agricultural fields, and with the monsoons, the woes just multiplied. With muddy roads and large puddles, it became extremely challenging to reach the lake bund.

Lesser Whistling-duck

Soon after, I visited some new areas around the town and I found more species such as Lesser Whistling-duck (*Dendrocygna javanica*), Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*), Barn Owl (*Tyto alba*) etc. One day I heard the loud booming call of the Watercock (*Gallicrex cinerea*) in the paddy fields. The bird looked so beautiful. It was one among the several lifers I had recently seen. I was so happy that I slept with a smile on my face that night.

Watercock

In the last week of July, I saw a male Knob-billed Duck (*Sarkidiornis melanotos*) in flight. The clouds were ready to pour down and watching the bird take flight in the backdrop of dark clouds was a beautiful sight. A few moments later I was stunned to see an Asian Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus hermaphroditus*) coming out of the bushes. The moment it saw me, it disappeared into the thick rice fields.

An exciting development was finding a pair of Woolly-necked Stork (*Ciconia episcopus*) hovering in the sky. The bird is listed in IUCN Red List as 'Vulnerable'. The population of the birds has been declining. I have been searching for different species of Storks but so far, I could only find a few of them.

House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), once so ubiquitous, are now confined only to a few pockets in the town. I found them mostly near human habitations which have still retained the old house architecture. Waking up to the sound of the chirpy and chattering calls of the Sparrows, is a lovely childhood memory I always cherish. Another bird that is a part of my childhood memory is the Vulture. More than two decades ago, I could easily spot Vultures perched on trees just as one finds Mynas and Crows today. Vultures were commonly seen in the market grounds and near slaughterhouses. I really wish both of these species regain their earlier status.

As I watched birds by myself, I recollected the chapter we studied in school on Salim Ali's experiences in birdwatching. It was titled 'Thrills of Birdwatching'. Sometimes birders get themselves into tricky situations as they completely immerse themselves in watching birds. There have been several occasions when I found myself walking endlessly in pursuit of birds. Sometimes I walked so much that I ended up in a neighbouring village!

A view of the fields at Bodhan

I also asked the farmers and fishermen about ideal locations, and they would guide me, while warning me of the lurking dangers. It is always advisable to ask the local people about the area one wants to visit.

A group of feral dogs

There also has been a rise in the population of feral dogs. Some of these dogs do not hesitate to attack. These dogs have become a menace to the wildlife too, and it has become a common sight to see groups of dogs living alongside agricultural fields and lake beds, attacking livestock and birds. There is sufficient documentation of wildlife predation and extinction by feral dog populations all over the world. There is an urgent need to tackle this problem.

After two months of birding, I prepared a checklist of the birds sighted in my town, and to my surprise, the number of resident bird species went up to 108. I was pleasantly surprised to see so many species thriving in and around my town. I still have some areas to cover. Also, the migrants start arriving by late August or early September. There will be many more bird species yet to be sighted!

Crimson Tip

Lime Butterfly

Although my focus was more on birds, along with the avian fauna I also spotted several species of Butterflies (Crimson Rose, Crimson Tip, Lime Butterfly etc) and reptiles like Lizards (Oriental Garden Lizard, Fan-throated Lizard) and Snakes (Rat Snake, Checkered Keelback, Striped Keelback, Red Sand Boa etc).

Fan-throated Lizard

Checkered Keelback

The presence of different types of species in a small town signifies the biodiversity potential of towns and villages in the Telugu states which is yet to be explored properly. Bodhan is just one among the 141 towns present in the state. Knowing species distribution is essential for wildlife conservation. I hope more and more people in the states take to birding or any wildlife activity that would help map the species in the region.

This is especially important because, during the initial phase of COVID global lockdown, social media was awash with pictures and videos depicting the healing of nature and the appearance of animals into the urban spaces, inviting discussions on human impacts on environment. To conclude that nature would heal in such a short span of time feels a stretch, given the destruction the planet has seen post Industrial Revolution.

There are vital lessons to be learnt from the pandemic. There are complex interconnections between humans and animals along with the environment which they live in. Destruction of environment is something we have to, ultimately, pay for. It is important that we don't imperil our own existence. Conservation should be encouraged. Thoughtful citizens and a responsive government can work together to protect our environment.

The checklist of the bird species spotted in these two months is as follows:

S. No	Species name	Scientific name	S. No	Species name	Scientific name
1	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*	55	Streak-throated Swallow	*Hirundo fluvicola*
2	Great Egret	*Egretta alba*	56	White-browed Wagtail	*Motacilla maderaspatensis*
3	Intermediate Egret	*Egretta intermedia*	57	Paddyfield Pipit	*Anthus rufulus*
4	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	58	Red-vented Bulbul	*Pycnonotus cafer*
5	Purple Heron	Ardea purpurea	59	White-browed Bulbul	*Pycnonotus luteolus*
6	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*	60	Common Iora	*Aegithina tiphia*
7	Black-crowned Night Heron	*Nycticorax nycticorax*	61	Oriental Magpie Robin	*Copsychus saularis*
8	Woolly-necked Stork	*Ciconia episcopus*	62	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*
9	Glossy Ibis	*Plegadis falcinellus*	63	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata bicolor*
10	Black-headed Ibis	*Threskiornis melanocephalus*	64	Tawny-bellied Babbler	*Dumetia hyperythra*
11	Red-naped Ibis	*Pseudibis papillosa*	65	Yellow-billed Babbler	*Turdoides affinis*
12	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	66	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
13	Black Kite	*Milvus migrans*	67	Jungle Prinia	*Prinia sylvatica*
14	Brahminy Kite	*Haliastur indus*	68	Plain Prinia	*Prinia inornata*
15	Indian Shikra	*Accipiter badius*	69	Common Tailorbird	*Orthotomus sutorius*
16	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	70	Pale-billed Flowerpecker	*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
17	Rock Bush Quail	*Perdicula argoondah*	71	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*
18	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	72	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*
19	Barred Buttonquail	*Turnix suscitator*	73	Red Avadavat	*Amandava amandava*
20	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*	74	Indian Silverbill	*Euodice malabarica*
21	Purple Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	75	Scaly-breasted Munia	*Lonchura punctulata*
22	Brown Crake	*Amaurornis akool*	76	Black-headed (or Tricolored) Munia	*Lonchura malacca*
23	Ruddy-breasted Crake	*Porzana fusca*	77	House Sparrow	*Passer domesticus*
24	Indian Roller	*Coracias benghalensis*	78	Black-breasted Weaver	*Ploceus benghalensis*
25	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*	79	Streaked Weaver	*Ploceus manyar*
26	Bronze-winged Jacana	*Metopidius indicus*	80	Baya Weaver	*Ploceus philippinus*
27	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	81	Brahminy Starling	*Temenuchus pagodarum*
28	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	82	Asian Pied Starling	*Gracupica contra*
29	River Tern	*Sterna aurantia*	83	Common Myna	*Acridotheres tristis*
30	Rock Pigeon	*Columba livia intermedia*	84	Indian Golden Oriole	*Oriolus kundoo*
31	Laughing Dove	*Streptopelia senegalensis*	85	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
32	Spotted Dove	*Streptopelia chinensis*	86	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
33	Eurasian Collared Dove	*Streptopelia decaocto*	87	Yellow Bittern	*Ixobrychus sinensis*
34	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*	88	Cinnamon Bittern	*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*
35	Plum-headed Parakeet	*Psittacula cyanocephala*	89	Watercock	*Gallicrex cinerea*
36	Southern Coucal	*Centropus sinensis*	90	Oriental Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*
37	Blue-faced Malkoha	*Phaenicophaeus viridirostris*	91	Little Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax niger*
38	Jacobin Cuckoo	*Clamator jacobinus*	92	Large Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*
39	Grey-bellied Cuckoo	*Cacomantis passerinus*	93	Eastern Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus coromandus*
40	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx variu*	94	Lesser Whistling-duck	*Dendrocygna javanica*
41	Indian Nightjar	*Caprimulgus asiaticus*	95	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*
42	Asian Palm Swift	*Cypsiurus balasiensis*	96	Yellow-eyed Babbler	*Chrysomma sinense*
43	Little Swift	*Apus affinis*	97	Black-winged Kite	*Elanus caeruleus*
44	Common Kingfisher	*Alcedo atthis*	98	Spotted Owlet	*Athene brama*
45	White-breasted Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*	99	Black Bittern	*Ixobrychus flavicollis*
46	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*	100	Barn Owl	*Tyto alba*
47	Common Hoopoe	*Upupa epops*	101	Painted Francolin	*Francolinus pictus*
48	Indian Grey Hornbill	*Tockus birostris*	102	Large Grey Babbler	*Argya malcolmi*
49	Coppersmith Barbet	*Megalaima haemacephala*	103	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptus ruficollis*
50	Indian Bushlark	*Mirafra erythroptera*	104	Asian Openbill	*Anastomus oscitans*
51	Ashy-crowned Sparrow Lark	*Eremopterix griseus*	105	Painted Stork	*Mycteria leucocephala*
52	Oriental Skylark	*Alauda gulgula*	106	Pied Kingfisher	*Ceryle rudis*
53	Dusky Crag Martin	*Ptyonoprogne concolor*	107	Chestnut-tailed Starling	*Sturnia malabarica*
54	Wire-tailed Swallow	*Hirundo smithii*	108	Cotton Pygmy-goose	*Nettapus coromandelianus*

Some other photos taken during this period:

Baya Weaver

Black-shouldered Kite

Millipede Swarm

Plain Prinia

Purple Sunbird male in eclipse plumage

Rose-ringed Parakeet

Spotted Owlet

Pied Bushchat

A view of the fields

White-browed Bulbul

Eurasian Collared Dove

Indian Crab

Indian Robin

Laughing Dove

Oriental Garden Lizard

Great Egret

Purple Heron

Chestnut-tailed Starling

A scene at Bodhan

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Notes on Sighting of Indian Nightjar chicks & Pied Crested Cuckoo young

Text & Photos: Azam Khan

Indian Nightjar chick

We have a piece of land about 4km from Chevella town. We have retained part of it in its natural state and allowed the natural vegetation to take over. At some places under the large trees of Jungle Jalebi (*Pithecellobium dulce*, also known as Madras Thorn or Manila Tamarind, '*Vilayati Imli*' in Hindi and '*Seema Chintakaya*' in Telugu), Jamun and Mahua, there is thick undergrowth of Lantana and some Bamboo.

In the month of July, I came across two dull-coloured eggs on the ground, apparently abandoned under a Mahua tree. They did not resemble Francolin or Lapwing eggs, which is what normally I would have expected on the ground in our area. A couple of weeks later, while crossing the same patch, from the corner of my eye I saw a slight movement. On closer inspection, I realised it was a chick covered in down feathers of almost the same colour as the mud and dried leaves around it. The camouflage was so perfect, it ensured that the chick was not spotted by any aerial or ground predators.

The chick was sitting motionless with its head half raised and eyes closed. The adults did not seem to be around, but since I regularly see Indian Nightjars in the vicinity, logically it could be assumed that this was the chick of an Indian Nightjar, too. I noticed that there was a second one close by only when it moved a few inches away to hide itself under a pile of leaves. I took a couple of quick photos and moved away, as I didn't want to disturb them further. It is heartening to know we have a pair of resident Nightjars raising their chicks at our farm.

Indian Nightjar chicks

In the last week of August, at another farm in Kumera village of Chevella, we disturbed a flock of Jungle Babblers sitting on a Jungle Jalebi tree. They initially moved to a nearby Neem tree and continued making loud alarm calls. I thought there was a snake nearby and started to look out for it. Then I saw a bird stuck in the Jungle Jalebi tree, trying to free itself from the thorny branches. It had plumage similar to that of a Bulbul but was larger in size, had a different beak and had a small crest. It looked quite familiar but I was unable to identify it.

Pied Crested Cuckoo young

We freed it from the thorns and it immediately hopped to a nearby branch. It was flapping its wings but made no sound. All the while, the Babblers were making an incessant clamour, and the group was joined by a curious Lapwing, which also contributed its expert comments.

We moved away and soon saw that the chick flew over to the Neem tree and joined the Babblers. The experts of our group identified it as a Pied Crested (or Jacobin) Cuckoo fledgling which was probably brought up by the Babblers. The one point I did not understand is why it kept quiet – whether it was out of fear or just so that it did not give away its identity.

I would also like to state for the record that all due care was taken to ensure that the young birds were not disturbed or put at risk in any way.

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Bird of the Month

Text and Photo: Umesh Mani

Asian Barred Owlet (*Glaucidium cuculoides*)

Asian Barred Owlet (Mandal, Uttarakhand, December 19, 2019)

Order: Strigiformes
Family: Strigidae
Genus: *Glaucidium*
Species: *G. cuculoides*
Size: 23 cm

Description & distribution: The Asian Barred Owlet, also known as the Cuckoo Owl or Cuckoo Owlet, is a medium-sized, rotund owl, brown overall with brown-barred underparts. It is similar to the Collared Owlet, but it is larger, has darker brown barring on the sides, and does not have the false eye spots on the back of the head. It has fine, pale buff spotting on the head, the mantle is plain or lightly barred, and upperparts, sides of head and neck, and wing-coverts are dull brown or olive-brown with buff to fulvous barring. It has white eyebrows extending beyond the eyes, and a white moustachial streak. The bill is yellowish-green, cere is greenish-horn and irises are lemon-yellow. The facial disc is diffuse. It has a clear white throat patch and the dark-brown barring on the upper part of the breast changes to weak streaking towards the lower part of the breast. Tarsi are feathered, and the olive-yellow toes are bare and sparsely bristled, with yellow soles and horn-brown claws. The tail is blackish or brown with (usually) six white or whitish widely-spaced bars. Juveniles have buff spotting on crown, nape and mantle, and the barring on breast and flanks is diffuse.

The Asian Barred Owlet is resident across north-east Pakistan, northern, central and north-eastern parts of India, Nepal, Bhutan, north Bangladesh, south-east Tibet, south-east China, and south-east Asia, including Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. It migrates from higher to lower elevations or plains during winter.

Habitat & behaviour: The Asian Barred Owlet prefers open submontane or montane forests of pine, oak, rhododendron etc, and subtropical and tropical evergreen forests at lower elevations. It is generally diurnal and is usually seen singly during the day on exposed perches like tree stumps, bare dry branches, telephone wires etc. It is most vocal at dawn and for a couple of hours afterwards, although it may at times vocalize during the day too. The usual call is a mellow *hoop*, while the song of the male is a combination of musical notes – *kwuhk kwuhk-ke-kwuhk kwuhk-kekekwurre kwurre kwurre-kwurre* – beginning with a soft stuttering series, accelerating from one note per second to around four notes per second, and building to a harsh crescendo before ending abruptly. The diet of the Asian Barred Owlet consists mainly of beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, locusts, mantids, termites, cicadas and other large insects, and it also takes small birds (which it is known to catch in flight), frogs, lizards, mice and other rodents. Its undulating flight consists of a series of several rapid flaps followed by a pause with its wings closed.

Nesting: The Asian Barred Owlet breeds generally between April and June. The nest is an unlined hole in a tree trunk; it is known to reuse an abandoned Barbet or Woodpecker nest, or even sometimes to kill these birds and take over their nest-holes. The usual clutch consists of 4-7 rounded white eggs.

Local name: The Asian Barred Owlet is known as *'Bada dundul'* in Hindi, *'Ashiya dagipecha'* in Bengali, *'Tanpum'* in Lepcha and '*Dao ku-ra-ru-ru'* in Cachar.

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OUTDOOR DURING THE LOCKDOWN
Trip Report: Ameenpur Lake, July 3, 2020

Text and Photos: Sravan Kumar Railla

A view at Ameenpur Lake

A plan to meet a new friend had been pending for a long time, but due to the pandemic we had been unable to get together or step out for birding. Finally, we decided that this couldn't wait any more and, on the evening of July 3, 2020, four of us – Kishan, Chinthan, Hussain and I – managed to combine this meet with a birding trip to Ameenpur Lake.

Traffic was lean enough to enable us reach the lake by 5:00PM. Birding over the bund, we could record a few common birds like Little Cormorant, Red Avadavat, Asian Pied Starling, Barn Swallow, Pied Bushchat, and a House Crow (nest with 3 chicks).

Along the bund are the agricultural fields, where the seasonal harvest activities had been completed, and they now remained damp but fallow lands, not currently in use. These fields yielded us a group of Grey-headed Swamphens foraging, a flock of Baya Weavers shuttling around among the reeds and the fallow fields, and two male Greater Painted-snipes foraging.

Ashy Prinia

An Ashy Prinia was seen carrying a *Neoscana* Sp. spider in its beak, hopping among the reeds on its way to the nest. A bushy Berry tree had an Indian Palm Squirrel nest with a litter of three young ones; we saw them coming out, following behind the parent. A pair of Green Bee-eaters and a Common Myna also were seen among the reeds around the fallow lands.

At the end of the bund, we saw a pair of Ducks flying overhead towards the water. Their bodies appeared bright orange, enhanced by the setting sun, and we identified them as Ruddy Shelducks, only to later revise the ID, after looking at the photographs, to Lesser Whistling-ducks. Down the bund towards the catchment area, we documented a fascinating, brightly coloured Rock Agama on the boulders.

Grey-headed Swamphen

Moving east to the 'Kingfisher pond', we recorded solitary individuals of several species: a Grey-headed Swamphen feeding on grass weeds, a Grey Heron, a Little Egret, a Spot-billed Duck, and an Oriental Darter perched on substrata in the waterbody.

Assorted birds at the 'fish stall point'

At the 'fish stall point', a mixed flock of Painted Storks, Cattle Egrets, Large Egrets and Black-crowned Night Herons were all seen foraging for fish waste dumped in the shallow water at the corner of the lake. From the scrub-covered boulders, a troop of Indian Peafowl was added to the list.

Painted Stork & Cattle Egret

A Black-naped Hare, sighted in the grass patch between the boulders, was feeding on the tender grass. The chorus by the Purple and Purple-rumped Sunbirds echoed around the boulders as they collected nectar from the flowering plants.

Purple-rumped Sunbird male

Moving down to the lake side, some birds from the larger flock of Spot-billed Pelicans rowed the waters, irregularly dipping their bills and sweeping their pouches, trying to catch their fish, and shuttled from the water to the perches provided by the artificial platforms. It was an uneasy scene – the Pelicans with the background of smoking industrial vents, and the crowd playing cricket on the opposite bank (during the pandemic!).

The artificial platforms at Ameenpur Lake

Spot-billed Pelican

In contrast to this, towards the west, we got to observe the silhouettes of the flying birds on a cloud canvas, and witnessed the dusk rolling into night above the ripples of the water body.

The list of bird species seen at Ameenpur Lake is given below:

Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name	Sl No	Species Name	Scientific Name
1	Lesser Whistling-duck	*Dendrocugna javanica*	28	Great Egret	*Casmerodius albus*
2	Indian Spot-billed Duck	*Anas poecilorhyncha*	29	Intermediate Egret	*Mesophoyx intermedia*
3	Indian Peafowl	*Pavo cristatus*	30	Little Egret	*Egretta garzetta*
4	Grey Francolin	*Francolinus pondicerianus*	31	Cattle Egret	*Bubulcus ibis*
5	Little Grebe	*Tachybaptis ruficollis*	32	Indian Pond Heron	*Ardeola grayii*
6	Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon)	*Columba livia*	33	Black-crowned Night Heron	*Nycticorax nycticorax*
7	Spotted Dove	*Stigmatopelia chinensis*	34	White-throated Kingfisher	*Halcyon smyrnensis*
8	Laughing Dove	*Spilopelia senegalensis*	35	Green Bee-eater	*Merops orientalis*
9	Asian Koel	*Eudynamys scolopaceus*	36	Rose-ringed Parakeet	*Psittacula krameri*
10	Common Hawk Cuckoo	*Hierococcyx varius*	37	Common Iora	*Aegithinia tiphia*
11	Indian Nightjar	*Caprimulgus asiaticus*	38	Black Drongo	*Dicrurus macrocercus*
12	Eurasian Coot	*Fulica atra*	39	House Crow	*Corvus splendens*
13	Grey-headed Swamphen	*Porphyrio porphyrio*	40	Ashy Prinia	*Prinia socialis*
14	White-breasted Waterhen	*Amaurornis phoenicurus*	41	Plain Prinia	*Prinia inornata*
15	Black-winged Stilt	*Himantopus himantopus*	42	Dusky Crag Martin	*Ptyonoprogne concolor*
16	Red-wattled Lapwing	*Vanellus indicus*	43	Barn Swallow	*Hirundo rustica*
17	Greater Painted-snipe	*Rostratula benghalensis*	44	Red-rumped Swallow	*Cecropis daurica*
18	Bronze-winged Jacana	*Metopidius indicus*	45	Asian Pied Starling	*Gracupica contra*
19	River Tern	*Sterna aurantia*	46	Indian Robin	*Saxicoloides fulicatus*
20	Painted Stork	*Mycteria leucosephala*	47	Pied Bushchat	*Saxicola caprata*
21	Oriental Darter	*Anhinga melanogaster*	48	Purple-rumped Sunbird	*Leptocoma zeylonica*
22	Little Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax niger*	49	Purple Sunbird	*Cinnyris asiaticus*
23	Great Cormorant	*Phalacrocorax carbo*	50	Baya Weaver	*Ploceus philippinus*
24	Spot-billed Pelican	*Pelecanus philippensis*	51	Red Avadavat	*Amandava amandava*
25	Cinnamon Bittern	*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*	52	Indian Silverbill	*Euodice malabarica*
26	Grey Heron	*Ardea cinerea*	53	Scaly-breasted Munia	*Lonchura punctulata*
27	Purple Heron	*Ardea purpurea*			

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Bird Humour

Umesh Mani

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For Private Circulation Only
Editors: Shanti Mani, Umesh Mani **Email:** bsap.pitta@gmail.com

For information, write to: Deccan Birders, PO Box 45, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500034. **Website:** www.deccanbirders.in. **E-group:** http://groups.google.co.in/group/deccanbirders. **Society membership** (in Rs.): Annual: 500 per annum; Student: 200 per annum; Corporate: 2000 per annum; Life: 3000. (*Add Rs 75 for outstation cheques.)*